

Urban Residential Vacancies, 1930-38

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IN keeping with the lower level of business activity and the consequent decrease in national income, residential vacancies in many cities moved upward in the first half of 1938. This reversed the movement from 1933 to 1937, during which period vacancies in cities making surveys dropped from an average of 8 or 9 percent to about 2 or 3 percent.

Trends and vacancy levels differ widely from city to city. Thus, while the percentage of vacant units in Oklahoma City rose from 1.6 percent in April 1937 to 4.0 percent in April 1938, the figure for San Antonio remained unchanged at 3.3 percent. Increases during the past year also may be noted in the data for St. Louis and for Oakland, Calif., although in both instances the most recent figures are still not far above the 1937 low points of 3.6 percent and 2.3 percent, respectively. In 1932, vacancies in these cities were 12.8 and 8.5 percent, respectively. The highest vacancy ratios revealed by the 1938 figures tabulated in table 1 were for Kansas City and Boston; the ratio in each of these cities was over 6 percent. The lowest vacancy ratios reported were for Ann Arbor, Mich., and Davenport, Iowa, with 1 percent each.

These figures are taken from the compilation of vacancy surveys prepared by the Division of Economic Research in connection with its program of furnishing data on real property and construction. The vacancy data thus brought together throw considerable light on one of the important elements affecting the prospects for new building. Along with construction costs, rents, costs of ownership, and other factors, the number of vacancies in a given area is of great importance in determining the outlook for residential construction. A knowledge of the number of vacancies in a city, and more particularly of the trends in occupancy and vacancy, enables local builders and prospective purchasers to judge with greater certainty the current and future demand for housing units. So, also, does it aid those in the related fields of building-supply and equipment manufacture and distribution to anticipate increases or decreases in the demand for their products within their marketing areas.

Vacancy Statistics Summarized

Vacancy surveys were undertaken in but few cities prior to 1930. In Utica they date back to 1921, and in Tampa, Madison, Worcester, Trenton, Indianapolis, Springfield, St. Paul, and a few other cities surveys were made at various times between 1924 and 1929. In 1930 and 1931 many cities made canvasses for the

first time, and the number of cities making regular surveys has remained fairly constant since that time. Efforts have been made to secure total vacancy percentages from all cities in which two or more surveys are known to have been made since January 1930. These data are brought together in table 1.

The source material for the vacancy figures presented here is of two types: (a) The Real Property Inventories sponsored by the Federal Government, and (b) the surveys or canvasses made by local organizations. The former were designed to secure complete information on all types of residential property in the community, including number and size of units, values, rentals, fixtures and equipment, age, state of repair, and number of occupants, as well as vacancy. They were thus of a thorough nature and involved a complete house-to-house canvass.

The private surveys undertaken by local agencies were usually concerned only with determining the number of vacancies; the factor of expenses prevented more comprehensive studies. The field work for these surveys is commonly done by local letter carriers who know the families on their routes, or by members of the local real estate board or other sponsoring organization through personal investigation.

The Real Property Inventories include the surveys made in 64 representative cities in January and February 1934, by the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, and well over a hundred inventories taken in as many towns and cities in 1934, 1935, and 1936, as C. W. A., F. E. R. A., and W. P. A. projects. They have been highly useful in many respects, but as a source of vacancy data they are subject to certain limitations. Because of the expense it was not feasible to undertake more than one such inventory in any city and thus no year-to-year comparisons can be made. The Real Property Inventories intentionally included all structures in which families were living or could live, whether usually considered livable dwelling units or not. The local private surveys, since they were made for the most part under the auspices of realtors, usually included only the standard types of dwelling units and frequently excluded vacant houses considered "not fit for habitation," "not rentable," or "undesirable." Real Property Inventory figures are thus generally higher than the results of private surveys made at the same time and place, and the two types are not comparable. Real Property Inventory figures are, however, given in italics in table 1.

In tabulating the vacancy percentages shown in table 1, an attempt was made, where possible, to place private survey figures for the same city on a comparable basis. In some cases, however, only the final vacancy percentages were available, and information as to the methods used in reaching them could not be obtained. In such cases the figures have been used where they were supplied by a reliable source and it was reasonable to assume that they were comparable with other figures from the same source.

An attempt has also been made to make the figures in table 1 comparable as between cities by eliminating houses under construction and including dwellings unfit for occupancy, wherever possible. Efforts were also made to insure that the survey figures reported covered

vacancies in all types of residence units in each city, and that the percentages were based on the correct total of existing dwelling units. Where variations from the general pattern were known to exist, but where they did not seriously affect the usefulness of the figures for comparative purposes, the data were used as furnished, with footnotes to explain the differences.

Differences in the degree of thoroughness with which the surveys were made, variations in the methods used, differences between definitions of "dwelling unit," "vacancy," and "unfit for occupancy," as used in the various cities, and variations in the application of these terms by individual canvassers, make it necessary to use these data with some caution. Their major value arises from the reflection which they give of the general

Table 2.—Comparison of Vacancy Percentages by Types of Dwelling Units, 1930-38

Year	White Plains, N. Y.			Oranges and Maplewood, N. J. ¹			Williamsport, Pa.		Ann Arbor, Mich.		Lansing, Mich.		South Bend, Ind.		
	1-family	2-family	Apartments	1-family	2-family	Apartments	Houses	Apartments	1-family	Multi-family	Houses	Apartments	1-family	Duplex	Apartments
1930	4.8		9.9	2.5	3.4	10.8	2.2	18.1	3.2	10.2			2.6	8.7	12.1
1931	5.8		9.7						2.5	9.5	0.0		5.4	11.3	10.6
1932	8.5	9.8	13.8	2.3	5.3	12.2	3.3	19.7	1.8	9.4	6.1	23.0	4.9	10.0	20.0
1933	8.3	9.9	17.0	2.4	7.0	10.6	0.0	25.9	2.1	9.0	0.1	20.7	5.4	20.0	20.0
1934	8.3			2.9	7.5	14.7			1.7	4.9	1.7	3.5	3.6	12.6	13.1
1935	2.4	2.6	3.4	2.2	4.8	0.6	2.2	8.9	1.7	2.0	1.0	1.0	2.2	5.4	5.8
1936				2.4	3.4	5.1	.8	2.5	.6	1.2		.8	1.4	2.4	4.8
1937				2.4	2.3	4.1			.4	.9		1.6	1.4	2.2	2.0
1938	4.0	2.1	3.2	2.4	1.5	4.5			.9	1.7	2.0	4.5	2.2	5.3	7.0
Thousand units ²	4.8	1.1	4.4	21.1	11.0	10.3	12.0	2.2	0.1	1.8	20.7	.0	21.3	1.7	1.9

Year	St. Paul, Minn.			Des Moines, Iowa			Omaha, Nebr. (Apr 8)			Kansas City, Mo.			St. Louis, Mo. ⁴ (Apr 8)		
	1-family	Duplex	Flats and apartments	1-family	Duplex	Apartments	1-family	Duplex	Apartments	1-family	Duplex	Flats and apartments	1-family	2-family	Apartments
1930				4.4	9.6	7.4	2.5	6.6	10.2	4.4	12.8				
1931	1.6	7.6	10.0	3.3	8.8	8.5	2.1	4.4	13.4	6.1	11.5	14.4	2.0	7.0	12.7
1932	1.6	6.3	13.5	3.3	10.6	12.4	2.2	5.5	18.0	5.9	12.1	15.8			
1933	1.4	8.2	7.9	3.8	17.8	15.4	3.1	12.3	21.1	7.4	15.4	18.9			
1934	1.1	4.3	11.0	2.3	10.7	11.1	2.1	7.3	8.5	7.5	16.8	16.4	2.1	7.5	9.3
1935	.8	2.5	4.7	1.7	6.0	4.8	1.2	4.4	4.1	7.3	14.5	14.4	1.8	5.2	8.2
1936	.8	1.8	4.3	1.3	4.1	4.2	1.3	3.2	8.2	5.5	10.3	9.4	1.8	5.7	7.6
1937	.7	1.5	2.7	1.6	4.0	2.0	1.2	2.2	5.5	8.2	11.0	7.0	2.2	5.0	5.4
1938				1.0	5.5	3.2	1.7	4.8	7.4	5.8	9.3	7.5	1.4	3.6	8.5
Thousand units ²	45.9	14.0	12.1	31.2	1.3	9.3	41.0	4.0	5.5	69.2	7.9	40.4			

Year	Tampa, Fla.		Oklahoma City, Okla. ⁵			San Antonio, Tex.			Denver, Colo. ⁶			Oakland and other East-bay cities, Calif.			San Diego, Calif. ⁷		
	Houses	Apartments	1-family	2-family	Apartments	1-family	Duplex	Multi-family	1-family	Double houses	Apartments	1-family	Duplex and flats	Apartments	1-family	Flats	Apartments
1930	10.3	18.0	0.3	4.2	2.0	3.5	11.8	13.1	3.0	8.1	12.1						
1931	7.5	21.2	2.0	5.4	11.2	4.1	10.7	24.4	3.1	7.1	14.5	4.1	14.7	17.9	4.9		
1932	7.4	29.0	6.8	15.9	17.7	5.5	11.8	10.5	3.9	10.4	10.9	5.1	12.4	15.6	4.0		
1933	7.0	24.2	8.5	16.8	24.4	5.2	12.8	17.3	3.0	8.4	13.3				4.2		
1934			1.4	5.5	8.8				2.2	4.1	0.7				4.8		18.0
1935	3.7	25.1	1.0	2.3	3.7	2.0	7.8	12.8	1.3	1.9	2.5	3.6			2.3	3.3	11.8
1936			.8	2.3	4.1	1.9	5.4	10.0	.9	1.0	1.1	2.3			1.1	3.5	6.1
1937	2.9	18.0	.8	4.3	3.9	2.5	5.5	9.0	1.1	1.0	1.7	1.4			1.3	2.1	4.2
1938			2.0	7.6	9.5	2.2	5.6	9.1				1.6					
Thousand units ²	25.1	4.1	24.3	5.3	5.7	45.9	5.8	5.4	51.0	7.0	12.5	104.9	43.9		34.1	2.5	7.4

¹ Data on flats and apartments over stores also available.

² Total number of occupied and vacant units of each type at time of most recent survey.

³ The 1-family-house figures are available for bungalows and 2-story houses separately.

⁴ Data on 3-family houses also available.

⁵ Data for Oklahoma City are composites of figures for 9 types of white residence units; data on Negro residences also available.

⁶ The original source also lists vacancies in 2-family houses and terraces.

⁷ Figures on duplexes and bungalow courts also available.

NOTE.—The cities for which data are shown are practically all of those which regularly collect detailed data by type of unit. Because of space limitations, only the more important types of unit are listed; notes 1 and 2 to 7 indicate additional types listed separately in some cities. It should be noted that the designations of identical types of units varies from city to city. See also pertinent footnotes to table 1.

levels of vacancy in the various cities, and of general trends in vacancy for the country as a whole. The figures in table 1 are given by calendar years and by the 4-month periods within each year in which the surveys were made. This has been done to provide a slightly higher degree of accuracy than annual figures allow, in making comparisons between cities and from year to year. The periods chosen indicate roughly the occupancy prior to shifts during the spring months, occupancy during the summer, and occupancy after the fall renting season.

In table 2 will be found supplementary data revealing the variations in the trends for different types of residential units in those cities which have regularly collected such detailed data. Vacancy appears to be generally lower in single houses than in multi-family houses, but the disparity tends to narrow when the vacancy ratio is low.

Analysis of Vacancy Data

A number of factors enter into the fluctuations in residential vacancy, and no one of them alone accounts for the various trends shown for different cities. Some of the factors which might be considered in interpreting the data include not only new construction and demolitions, but changes in the number of families, through death, marriage, divorce, migration to or from the cities, and the doubling or undoubling of separate families.

The trend in vacancies is, of course, not identical for all cities. In many, such as Indianapolis, St. Louis, and Kansas City, substantial overconstruction and

other factors had already produced a high rate of vacancy prior to 1931, and the depression served merely to accentuate the maladjustment. In others, such as Cleveland, Oklahoma City, and South Bend, vacancy was reasonably low in 1930, and depression conditions appear to have accounted for the high levels of 1932-33. Most cities appear to have experienced the same sharp increase in occupancy beginning in 1933, but the character of the change in each city has differed, as affected by the type and age of the buildings in the city, the direction and nature of its growth, the composition of its population, and other purely local factors. Although changes in general economic conditions may produce similar effects in many different areas, local factors tend to produce diverse results.

It should therefore be emphasized that the vacancy situation, while susceptible to some degree of measurement both on a national scale and by comparison and analogy among cities, is essentially one for local investigation and analysis. It is highly desirable that local interests should sponsor this type of activity.

For the benefit of organizations desiring to undertake vacancy surveys, the Division of Economics and Statistics of the Federal Housing Administration has recently prepared a manual of suggested procedure, available on request to that Administration at Washington, D. C. This bulletin provides an indispensable and exhaustive description of the methods which have been developed to facilitate the collection, at minimum expense, of the most useful detailed information on housing vacancy.